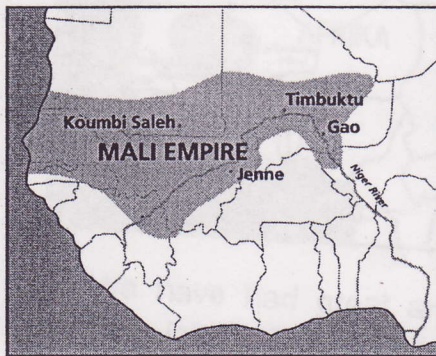


Voices from the Past: Mansa Musa

I am called Mansa Musa, emperor or "mansa" of the empire of Mali. My ancestor Sundiata, a magician of much talent, established my family's rule over this great land. According to our stories, Sundiata was a royal slave among the Soso. The Soso Tribe had taken control of part of the old Ghana after Berbers, Muslim invaders from the north, destroyed that empire around 1100. Sundiata gained favor and power until 1235 when he was able to seize control of the Soso and the major trade routes for gold. Sundiata was very clever and also taught our people to grow cotton and weave cloth from it.



My other ancestors helped gain more land, however the empire has grown still larger since I came to the throne in 1312. My skilled soldiers have been able to spread our holdings from the western ocean as far eastward as the Niger River. I like to say that it takes a whole year to travel from one end of our land to the other, but I know this is a great exaggeration.

Our empire is wealthy, since we control the gold trade and our people are excellent farmers, herders, and craftsmen. Mali has also become a center of culture in North Africa. The city of Timbuktu is today perhaps the most famous center of learning, especially in law and the study of Islam. There are libraries and universities that attract Muslim scholars from many lands.

Though most of my loyal subjects are already followers, I have worked very hard to bring the people to accept the religion of Islam. My family has long been Muslim, as have many of the royal families of the Sahel. Since becoming mansa I have built mosques throughout the empire. I have even taken the pilgrimage to Makkah that is required of Muslims and brought thousands of my subjects with me.

We left on our journey in the 17th year of my reign in a caravan of 60,000 men, including 12,000 slaves. We dressed in our finest garments. Even the slaves wore silk and carried staffs of gold. In addition to the camels that carried the men, we also brought 80 more, carrying 300 pounds of gold each. It was my hope to create a good impression in both Makkah and in the Egyptian city of Cairo where we stopped along the way.

I believe our journey was a complete success. Not only was it a deep religious experience, but Mali has also increased its position in the world. More than ever, traders are coming to Timbuktu. And since our pilgrimage to the East, Muslims from Egypt and Arabia are now traveling to our empire to read the writings in our libraries, to study, and to pray in the Great Mosque of Timbuktu. I feel that I am most blessed, and the empire of Mali is in the hands of God as well. There is little more that an old man could ask.